

Teaching Critical Media Makers

Convener: Derek Kompare, Southern Methodist University

Teaching Media Dialectics

Chuck Kleinhans, Northwestern University/JUMP CUT

While there are many issues here, I would like to outline my experience from teaching a course in cross-cultural media which enrolls both MFA and PhD students (as well as a few seniors) and which has everyone both make creative work which crosses culture and write critical essays on cross cultural topics. In short, the theory and practice of working across cultural boundaries. Students came from different majors and different levels of media expertise. The important thing was getting hands-on experience in doing cross cultural media and reflecting on the experience.

The syllabus for the course is online at:

<http://www.ejumpcut.org/gatewaypages/kleinhansfolder/13/426crosscult/crosscultMedia.html>

The key elements of the course are:

1. I actively try to recruit students from different departments and programs. This produces a useful mix of different perspectives, which is especially important at an elite school like Northwestern where media students often have a limited experience of class, race, ethnic, and national diversity. Our undergrad majors are familiar with both critical/cultural analysis and media production; although most aim for a career in media production, a significant number aim to be critics, writers, or pursue academic careers. All our PhDs are expected to take some production courses, and all MFAs take some critical studies courses. Typically our grad students have some facility in both areas (a distinctive feature of our program) and thus prospective students who want to do both are attracted to NU.
2. Emphasis is on some basic concerns in international cross-cultural analysis, such as: the question of documentary realism; ethnographic, grass roots, and political approaches; problems of verbal and nonverbal translation; variations in reception; and professional ethical questions. Various examples are screened and discussed to develop a comparative analysis of different media and modes of representation.
3. All students have to do at least a modest fieldwork project which may be presented/documented in any suitable medium: photography, film, video, print, audio, performance, etc. The basic parameters of the field work project involve the student examining and representing members of a specific and significantly different culture than their own; the difference may be based in nationality, gender, class, race, ethnicity, religion, age, national culture, etc. In addition to presenting the work for class critique, a final analytic summary of the project is required.
4. Students are encouraged to work in accessible media (e.g. 35mm slide show, cassette audio, home camcorder, Macintosh, etc). Collaborative work is possible. Students with no previous experience or training in media making are expected to use simple consumer level equipment: snapshot cameras, cassette tape

recorders, etc. Level of experience will be taken into account in grading: that is, an MFA student is expected to perform at a much higher level than someone without hands-on media experience.

At the core of this project is an exchange between theory and practice. The ethical questions that course readings discuss, or the problems inherent in translating from one culture to another, the power dynamic in media making across a cultural boundary become tangible issues. It is sometimes easy for students to critique the problems with examples shown in class from a rather lofty and distanced position. It is much harder to stick to abstractions when you are making something that requires pragmatic adjustments on the fly.

Obviously, it takes a village/department to raise a media maker. This kind of experience for students doesn't resolve everything, but it is a step to having future scholars and future makers realize there is a dialectic between theory and practice. Theory without a pragmatic understanding of the medium can fly off into ethereal abstraction, while practice that isn't thoughtful usually remains banal and unimaginative.